



## HEALTHY ELDER BOARD DYNAMICS

If it's true that "everything rises and falls on leadership," then the health of our churches will be directly related to the health of the leaders that oversee them. The following principles and practices will help to ensure that your elder board is functioning biblically and effectively.

### 1. Understand the biblical role of elders.

The most common word picture used for elders in the New Testament is that of a shepherd (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; Heb. 13:17). The role of a shepherd is basically to lovingly lead and feed his flock (Psalm 23:1-2, Isaiah 40:11) and to bravely and diligently protect his flock (1 Sam. 17:34-35; John 10:11-13). So too, elders have primarily been tasked with leading the church on mission in accordance with God's Word, ensuring that the church is being faithfully nourished by God's Word, and protecting the church against individuals and influences that are contrary to God's Word (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Tim. 3; Titus 1). Jesus also taught that a good shepherd is not only concerned with the well-being of the entire flock, but he also gives loving attention to individual sheep as well, including the lost ones (Luke 15:4-7; John 10:14-16). So too, elders should not cloister themselves away in an ivory tower board room; by example, they should lead the way in loving and discipling people both inside and outside the church (1 Pet. 5:3).

### 2. Put godly character first.

In many churches, new people are moved into positions of leadership very quickly— especially those who are good-looking, successful, intelligent, likeable, eager, or gifted. The only problem with this approach is that these are not the qualities that the Scriptures emphasize when it comes to choosing church leaders. From God's perspective, the single most important qualification for leadership within the church is godly character. And unlike some of these more superficial qualities which can be observed almost immediately, character is something that can only be observed over time. This is why the Scriptures repeatedly urge us to go slowly when placing people in positions of leadership within the church (1 Tim. 3:6, 10; 5:22). You will both bless your church and spare it untold heartache by taking the necessary time to carefully evaluate potential elders in light of the detailed character qualifications listed for this position in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-3. (A tool like the [Elder Qualifications Questionnaire](#) can be useful in this regard.)

### 3. Give attention to the makeup of your board.

When Jesus chose His apostles, He gathered a very diverse group of men comprised of differing personalities, persuasions, and professions. Churches would be wise to follow His example in their selection of elders. Every elder board needs a few bold personalities who are willing to "charge the hill" and trust God for more than seems humanly possible. But every elder board also needs a few cautious personalities who will wisely guard the church from needlessly risky or reckless decisions. Similarly, every elder board would benefit from the wisdom of some seasoned veterans, older men who have years of accumulated wisdom and life experience. But every board also needs to be intentional about developing and recruiting younger men who can bring fresh energy and ideas to the table. While there must be unity in areas of theology and ministry philosophy, a diversity of personalities and perspectives will generally make for more well-rounded decisions.

### 4. Work toward general consensus in your decisions, not unanimous consent.

As sinful, flawed, biased human beings, none of us consistently make wise decisions. That's why Proverbs 11:14 says, "*in the multitude of counselors there is safety*" (NKJV). It would be a mistake to entrust a major decision that significantly affects the direction of your church into the hands of just one person. But that's



essentially what we do when we require unanimous consent for elder board decisions. Significant concerns should always be heard and considered, but by giving a single person veto power, we grant them ultimate decision-making authority over the rest of the board. This approach assumes that in every situation the single dissenting elder is walking in the Spirit and discerning the will of God to a greater degree than all the other elders, but that is an unfounded assumption. For this reason, it is better to aim for general consensus rather than perfect unanimity. A unified board can generally make decisions without taking a formal vote. But when a vote becomes necessary, the minority should humbly defer to the wisdom of the majority.

#### **5. Debate with many voices but speak with one voice.**

Healthy debate among mature people with differing perspectives usually produces the best decisions. But once general consensus has been reached, the decision of the board must be honored and supported by every board member. It's unacceptable to have individual board members saying to people in the church, "Well, the board decided this, but I don't agree and here's why..." Nothing could be more disunifying (Eph. 4:3). Far better to say, "We discussed this at length and took into account a variety of viewpoints, but at the end of the day, we made this decision together as a board, and I support it." If an elder ever feels so strongly about a matter that he cannot in good conscience say that, then he should consider stepping down as an elder.

#### **6. Clearly define the roles of lay elders, the Lead Pastor, and the pastoral staff.**

1 Timothy 5:17-18 indicates that while there should be a plurality of elders in any given church, not every elder will play the same role, have the same degree of responsibility, or receive the same degree of remuneration. These differences should be acknowledged and defined in each church.

- **The relationship of lay elders to pastoral staff**

Today most churches have some elders who volunteer their time and minister in a limited part-time capacity (sometimes called "lay elders") and other elders who minister in a more full-time, vocational capacity (sometimes called "pastors"). Because lay elders typically have less available time to invest, it is generally best for them to lend their voice to broader doctrinal and directional church matters but delegate day-to-day operational church matters to the pastoral staff whose duties are overseen by the Lead Pastor (or Executive Pastor).

- **The relationship of the Lead Pastor to the elders**

It's been said that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." But it's also been said that "when everyone is in charge, no one is." Both maxims are true, so how do you resolve this tension on an elder board? First, by acknowledging that apart from Christ, no single person has ultimate authority within the church—this is why there must be a plurality of elders. But second, by acknowledging that every team needs a leader—not a dictator, but a strong servant leader who welcomes accountability, invites discussion, casts vision, and catalyzes movement. Because of his unique calling, training, experience, and gifting, the Lead Pastor is generally best suited to fulfill this role on the board. The elder board should hold the Lead Pastor accountable to the highest moral standards and to agreed-upon ministry objectives, but at the same time, grant him permission to lead as "first among equals." This does not necessarily mean that the Lead Pastor must fulfill the administrative role of elder board chairman. In fact, it's generally better if he doesn't. But he should work closely with the chairman to set the agenda for elder meetings.

**NOTE:** Lead Pastors, if you want to truly enjoy the trust of your elders, then you must work hard to earn that trust through a consistent track record of mutual respect, integrity, competence, and wise decision-making. And if you want to truly benefit from the wisdom of your elders, then you would do well to listen carefully to their thoughts on an issue before prematurely weighing in with your own.



- **The relationship of pastoral staff to the elders**

Putting pastoral staff members (other than the Lead Pastor) on the elder board as voting members can be problematic because it creates a scenario in which those staff members report to the Lead Pastor as employees in the office, but he reports to them as elders in board meetings. This creates the potential for significant confusion and conflict. For this reason, while it may be wise to have pastoral staff members sit in on elder meetings, it is generally inadvisable to make them official voting members of the elder board. If, for biblical, philosophical, or practical reasons, a church believes that pastoral staff members should be voting elders, then guidelines should be established which clarify the following: 1) the Lead Pastor reports directly to the lay elders only, 2) the Lead Pastor and lay elders must be allowed to go into executive session to discuss pastoral staff performance issues, and 3) lay elders must always comprise a majority of the elder board. (This prevents the Lead Pastor from stacking the board with people who are dependent on him for a paycheck.)

### **7. Establish term limits for your elders.**

When you have good elders, it will be tempting to want to keep them on the board until they die! But allowing elders to serve indefinitely increases the likelihood of elder burnout, it tends to disincentivize ongoing leadership development, and it minimizes the opportunities for potential new elders to get involved and for fresh perspectives to be heard. For this reason it is generally best to establish term limits for elders. A common scenario is to allow elders to serve no more than two back-to-back terms (usually lasting 2-3 years each) after which they must step down for at least one year before being eligible to serve again.

### **8. Use the right communication tools for the right discussions.**

There are certain board communications that can be handled simply and efficiently by email (schedules, updates, simple decisions, etc.). However, email has significant limitations as a communication tool. Without the ability to read body language, it's very easy to misread the sender's true intentions. And there's always the risk of a non-elder being inadvertently copied on a sensitive email. Zoom meetings can also raise privacy concerns since family members are sometimes within earshot. As a general rule, the greater the complexity of an issue and the greater the need for confidentiality, the more important it becomes to discuss things in person.

### **9. Create intentional shepherding structures within your church.**

Hebrews 13:17 says, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.”* Since elders will be held accountable by God for the spiritual well-being of the people whose souls have been entrusted to their care, it is vital that they have a way of not only knowing who those people are, but also how they are doing. This means that elders must not only establish some kind of membership process to identify who's part of their flock and who's not, but they must also establish shepherding structures to enable them to keep tabs on the spiritual well-being of the individual sheep within their larger flock. Inevitably, these structures will need to change as the church grows (Ex. 18; Acts 6). When the church is very small, much of this shepherding responsibility will fall to the pastor and elders directly. As the church grows, however, they will need to equip and empower small group leaders and others to carry out this shepherding responsibility under their oversight (Eph. 4:11-12). But with each stage of growth, the elders should ensure that every member of the body has a clearly designated leader within the church who knows them, engages them regularly, and assumes responsibility for their spiritual care.

### **10. Watch over yourselves.**

While elders are shepherds, it's important for them to remember that they're also sheep and that they need watching over as well! This is why Paul instructed the Ephesian elders to *“keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”* (Acts 20:28, NIV). Elders must not only tend to the spiritual health of the church; they must also tend to their own spiritual health and that of their fellow elders. This



means that in their meetings, they must not only look out at the church and ask, “How are *they* doing spiritually?”; they must also periodically look across the table and ask “How are *you* doing spiritually? How are *we* doing spiritually?” A good exercise in this regard is to periodically review the list of biblical elder qualifications as a group, have each elder individually assess where he’s doing well and where he needs to grow, and commit to pray for one another and encourage one another in these areas.

### **11. Schedule periodic time away for reflection and relationship-building.**

One of the dangers for church leaders is that they often spend so much time working *in* the ministry that they rarely take time to work *on* the ministry. In other words, they get so caught up in responding to immediate needs that they rarely take time to pause, step back, and evaluate the overall health of the church, the clarity of their vision, and the effectiveness of their discipling strategies. But this kind of reflection takes more time than a typical elder meeting will afford. Another problem is that for leadership teams to work together effectively, they must know and trust each other well, but relationships are not easily formed around a board room table. For these reasons, elders should intentionally schedule regular meals together and periodic retreats for reflection and relationship-building. It is in these kinds of environments that friendships form most naturally and fresh ideas flow most freely.

### **12. Don’t neglect the Word and prayer.**

The twelve apostles functioned as the first elders in the church in Jerusalem. At one point, they found themselves overwhelmed by the administration of their food distribution ministry, so they found qualified men and said, “*we will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word*” (Acts 6:3-4, NIV). These proto-elders rightly understood that as important as their administrative responsibilities were, of far greater importance was their focused attention on the Word and on prayer—listening to God and speaking to God. These activities should play a prominent role in our elder meetings as well. Rather than merely listening to each other’s voices, elders must regularly look to the Scriptures to hear the voice of God and discern His will for specific situations as they arise within the church. Similarly, prayer must never become little more than a formality at the front end of a meeting or an afterthought quickly offered in the closing minutes. Prayer must play a central role in our elder meetings, for it is only through prayer that we can experience God’s fullest protection, strength, and blessing in our churches.

### **13. Remember your reward.**

It may not always feel like it, but what elders do is of eternal significance, and it will yield eternal rewards!

*Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you...And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4)*